

Capstone Cabaret

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

Celia Villacres

**Thesis Advisor**  
Michael Elliott

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Elliott", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**Ball State University**  
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## Abstract

In musical theatre, we sing because the emotion becomes too strong to speak. Words alone cannot express what needs to be said. In teaching works of musical theatre to groups, duets, and soloists, I learned how to pull emotions out of the actors I worked with, as well as how to teach the technical and expressive aspects of the songs. I worked with educated and experienced people who taught me how to better myself through this project. Exploring musicals as diverse as *Ruthless!* and *Hair* gave me a look into several different styles. Organizing a group of more than twenty people gave me experience with working with conflicting schedules and collaborating with different personalities. The end result was a cabaret-style performance of musical theatre songs that was unanimously described as entertaining, precise, and professional.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Michael Elliott for his guidance and support throughout this project. His suggestions were invaluable and he has pushed me to become a better musician over the last two years since I've known him.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jim Helton, my piano teacher for the last four years. I have grown so much under your teaching, both as a pianist and as a person. The dedication you have shown toward your work is nothing less than inspiring.

Lastly, I would like to thank Mrs. Alex Kocoshis for her guidance, support, and practical suggestions. I would not have been able to get my group numbers coordinated without her.

## Artist's Statement

I always knew piano was for me. I begged for lessons when I was five years old and immediately fell in love. I started unconsciously analyzing the old albums my grandmother would play from the living room, learning to love the old musical reviews and golden-age musicals. From the moment my grandmother had me doing my first Ethel Merman impression (“There’s No Business Like Show Business” was a house favorite), musical theatre had stolen my heart away.

I came to Ball State University as a piano performance major, thinking that it was the “correct” path to get me where I wanted to be; a musical theatre music director. I quickly found that the classical repertoire and five-hour-a-day practice minimums, while wonderful in their own right, were not particularly conducive to a musical theatre career. I learned about the Integrated Studies program and switched to an integration of piano and theatre at the end of my sophomore year.

While I am glad I made the switch, I am so thankful for those years I spent as a piano performance major. I learned theory and music history, as well as aural skills and analysis skills, all of which have increased my musical ability ten-fold. My piano playing has improved exponentially since starting lessons with Dr. Jim Helton. His high standards and guiding hand helped me develop a subtlety and sensitivity to my playing, which I have since been able to transfer to the music I play in the theatre. My secondary voice lessons have helped me to better understand the voice, both in mechanics and technique.

As my theatrical knowledge grew in my new major, I took part of several musicals through the Department of Theatre and Dance. I saw all of my work culminate into a senior thesis, which I have decided to call Capstone Cabaret. This would be a performance focused on Show Business (as there's really no business like it); getting into it, getting out of it, trying and failing, as well as the stress and self-doubt that goes along with it. My advisor and I started putting together musical theatre songs that fit this program. I soon had a list of songs that was much longer than necessary. I thought of all the people who owed me favors in exchange for my accompanying them in years past and quickly filled the roles. Alex Kocoshis, for whom I was a teaching assistant, allowed me to teach her singing class some group numbers to be performed on my cabaret. My Cabaret set list filled up quickly.

In coaching the solo and duet groups, I learned how to encourage performers to work to their full potential. I have realized over the years to not accept the first performance an actor or actress gives to you. They can almost always be pushed further with the right direction. I learned to give advice on diction, acting choices, and breath support. I even learned to use my musical knowledge to inform the performers of musical elements in the vocal part and in the accompaniment that they can use to their advantage. For example, in *Where Tina Gets it From*, the young woman playing Tina's mother has several opportunities in the music to be bigger than life, which plays off her timid housewife cliché of a comedic character.

The opening number of the performance was "On My Way" from the musical *Violet*. This piece was chosen because Mrs. Kocoshis's singing class was doing cuts from *Violet* as their class musical. I was allowed to teach the class their songs, and Mrs.

Kocoshis suggested that I use one of the songs on my cabaret performance. “On My Way” was the perfect fit for my show business theme because of its optimistic I’m-going-somewhere message. The challenges in teaching this song came with its length, overlapping parts, harmony, and diction. The length was conquered by splitting up the song into its sections, and teaching similar sections first. This allowed the singers to learn faster by comparing similarities. Overlapping parts were learned by hearing each part separately and having the students record their parts. Once they were comfortable with their own parts, we put them together with a steady clap in the background to keep time. Once the students were comfortable with that, we dropped the clap and added accompaniment. Harmonies were learned in the same fashion. Diction, or the pronunciation of words, was very important to this song. Crisp diction gives the song more energy. The use of correct or modified vowels also allowed for held notes to be more in tune and easier to reach. We also worked on supporting our sound from our diaphragm. Furthermore, we discussed the plot of the musical in order to understand the motivations of each character.

The second piece on the program is a song from my favorite musical: *Ruthless!*. The song “Born to Entertain” is a standard in young girls’ musical theatre repertoire. The song is sung by the character Tina, and is about her passion for singing and dancing, and that she can’t imagine doing anything else in her life but entertaining. One of the biggest challenges for this song was finding a performer who would fit the part. Fortunately I knew of a sophomore musical theatre major in the Department of Theatre and Dance whose small size and light and high voice fit the role perfectly. Our big challenge with this song was getting a jazz quality from such a light-voiced singer. We worked on some

support and spacing techniques to get a bigger sound. We also added some vocal frills (trills, accents, and leans) to make the song a bit jazzier.

“Where Tina Gets it From” followed on the program. It is also from *Ruthless!* and includes Tina’s mother and a potential talent agent. The mother is a housewife who believes she is untalented (even though she becomes a star by the end of the show) and the talent agent is very interested in turning Tina into a Broadway sensation. This one was difficult in terms of harmonies, rhythms, and comedic timing. Harmonies and rhythms were both learned through repetition. We would speak the rhythm at least three times, then go over the notes on a neutral syllable a few times, then put them together multiple times until it became natural. Putting the parts together was surprisingly easy, as both of the singers had great independence. Both actresses were naturally very funny as well, which helped with the comedy, but we decided to add in a mini dance break and a joke (“Take me home!” “Where do you live?”) to lighten the mood even more.

After “Where Tina Gets it From,” the mood changed for “Calm” from *Ordinary Days*. This is a patter song (a song with rapid enunciation of words) about living and struggling in New York City. The performer came into rehearsal already knowing the notes and lyrics, so our main focus was on the collaboration between pianist and singer on such an intricate piece. We made sure we both knew when and where to slow down, when to pause, and when a breath (and therefore a pause in the piano part) was needed.

“Moving Too Fast” from *The Last Five Years* was next on the program. This piece dealt with some complicated key changes. Because of that, the singer and I spent a lot of time listening to the chord changes with the melody played over top. This helped get the changes in singer’s ears. The subject matter was perfect for the cabaret’s show

business theme because it dealt with a person who was thrown into fame, and though he feels that things are “moving too fast,” he is thoroughly enjoying the ride.

Next on the set list was “Look at Me” from *Violet*. This was another one of the songs from Mrs. Kocoshis’s singing class. Technically, this piece proved to be a challenge both melodically and rhythmically for the performer. Our frequent rehearsals focused on slow practice to solidify notes and rhythms. The multiple time signature changes and meter changes were difficult to navigate, but once we agreed on a path, we stuck with it. Artistically, this song presented challenges. In the musical, the character singing the song has been disfigured from an accidental axe swing, which she tries to get “cured” by seeking out a televangelist. Within the world of the cabaret, however, the singer and I discussed how physical appearance is so important in the entertainment business. This brought a new layer to the song, with a universal appeal to anyone who has ever felt their physical appearance was inadequate.

Following “Look at Me” was “Eyes Look Your Last” from *Hair*. This was another one from Mrs. Kocoshis’s singing class. This was especially difficult for me to teach as I did not have any experience with 60s rock. I started with the basics: notes, rhythms, and diction. After that, I listened to recordings of *Hair* for musical interpretations and asked Mrs. Kocoshis for advice on style. She helped me explain the freedom of character and voice necessary for this type of music. The soloists worked hard to get a more rock-like tone (grittier, with some pop fluidity) while the rest of the ensemble found the “hippie” freedom in movement and voice.

After this song was “Carousel” from *Jacques Brel is Alive & Well and Living in Paris*. It is a song that uses the same sets of lyrics multiple times, all the while getting

faster from beginning to end. The story starts out a moderately paced waltz describing a typical carnival scene. As the song gets faster, the light, happy carnival world melts away to reveal a slow descent into insanity. This went along with the show business theme by looking behind the façade of what the media shows us to the toll that “the business” can take on some people. Character work and diction at a fast pace were focused on in our rehearsals. We worked on the changes the singer would make from the beginning (light hearted, happy) to the middle (scared, noticing change), to the end (completely overwhelmed, going insane). We worked the lyrics by practicing them at a moderate pace and slowly accelerated until the words came out clearly at the performance tempo. Much of the focus was on keeping the words at the tip of the tongue to necessitate less motion of the mouth to create each word, resulting in the ability to speak faster.

Following this came “Whatever Happened to My Part?” from *Spamalot*. This song goes to show that even when a person wins a part in a Broadway show, they may not feel totally fulfilled. “The Diva’s Lament,” as it is subtitled, even mentions the direction that Broadway is headed in; the diva is constantly “replaced by Britney Spears,” or whatever other star is currently popular. I worked with the singer on how to shape and phrase this piece, including where the high point of the song was, how to build to that point, and how to give it a strong finish.

The performance concluded with me playing a solo transcription of Jason Robert Brown’s “I’m in Bizness” from his album *Wearing Someone Else’s Clothes*. This finished the program by not focusing on a specific singer, but rather the music itself.



As a pianist, this piece tested my jazz and technical skills, calling for many hours of practice to become comfortable with the intricate and fast-paced passages.

Besides the piano accompaniment I provided, the majority of the pieces discussed were also accompanied by a drum set. I rehearsed several times with the percussionist and through that process learned how to better communicate with other musicians, particularly drummers, on technique and style. It was a wonderful experience exploring stylistic options for each piece with such a collaborative musician. I look forward to building upon this collaboration in future endeavors.

At the cabaret, donations were collected to benefit the American Cancer Society. This was done in memory of my grandmother, who passed away from thyroid cancer almost ten years ago. It was my grandmother that piqued my interest in musical theatre all those years ago. She brought me to my first Broadway in Chicago musical (*The Lion King*), and it was her that encouraged (sometimes financially) my piano lessons and practicing. I will always be grateful for that.

My time at Ball State has given me many strengths as a musician. Besides the academic and technical skills of music theory, sight singing, and piano, I've learned to coach singers on breath, technique, phrasing, and diction, as well as critically analyze musical scores and librettos and work as a collaborative theatre artist and accompanist in the realm of musical theatre. I believe I am ready to take the next step in my education, which will be to learn as much as I can while teaching what I already know. I look forward to implementing the skills I have learned at Ball State University and to share my knowledge as I continue to develop my craft and grow as an artist.



# Capstone Cabaret

An Honors Thesis

Celia Villacres, Music Director

Choral Hall  
Music Instructional Building  
April 11, 2014  
7:30 p.m.

The thought of trying to break into the show business world is terrifying, exciting, and full of possibilities. This performance identifies a variety of emotions we all experience in the entertainment world, from the most optimistic ("On My Way") to the successful ("Moving Too Fast") to the absolutely crazed ("Carousel"). The many aspects of auditioning, from trying to feel "Calm" to feeling insecure about one's appearance ("Look at Me") can be overwhelming. Even if we break into the world, we can sometimes be left dissatisfied ("Whatever Happened to My Part?").

Whatever happens, it's important to remember why we do what we do: we love performing so much, we can't imagine doing anything else.

Thank you for joining us as we present this program. We hope you enjoy the show!

*Celia Villacres*



All donations collected at this show will benefit the American Cancer Society. Thank you for your donation!

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| <b>"On My Way"</b>                     | Singing for the Non-MTO<br>Section 1*  | <i>Violet</i>   |
| <b>"Born to Entertain"</b>             | Hannah Lee                             | <i>Ruthless! The Musical</i>                                  |
| <b>"Where Tina Gets it From"</b>       | Hannah Strayhorn and Kelley Johnson    | <i>Ruthless! The Musical</i>                                  |
| <b>"Calm"</b>                          | Natalie Masini                         | <i>Ordinary Days</i>  |
| <b>"Moving Too Fast"</b>               | Caleb Donahoe                          | <i>The Last Five Years</i>                                    |
| <b>"Look at Me"</b>                    | Kelly Smith                            | <i>Violet</i>   |
| <b>"Eyes Look Your Last"</b>           | Singing for the Non-MTO<br>Section 2** | <i>Hair</i>   |
| <b>"Carousel"</b>                      | Mary Taylor                            | <i>Jacques Brel is Alive and Well<br/>and Living in Paris</i> |
| <b>"Whatever Happened to My Part?"</b> | Renee Jackson                          | <i>Spamalot</i>   |
| <b>"I'm in Bizness" (Excerpt)</b>      | Celia Villacres                        | <i>Wearing Someone<br/>Else's Clothes</i>                     |

Drum Set: Mike Tabor

\*Singing for the Non-MTO Section 1: Kelly Smith, Lexie Conner, Brandon Merriweather, Cole Abell, Abigale Mitchell, Liz Curry, Matthew Manley, Hannah Strayhorn, John Banes, Kasey Needham.

\*\*Singing for the Non-MTO Section 2: Evan Cullinan, Kelley Johnson, Kate Yost, Liz Curry, Edward Costello, Andrew Daniels, Maggie Wanecke.

Special Thanks To:

Mr. Michael Elliott

Mrs. Alexandra Kocoshis

Dr. James Helton

Ms. Jodi Cotton

Mrs. Johnna Tavianini

And to all of my singers/performers!

I couldn't have done it without you!

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graduation from the Honors College.*